World Chronicle

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EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The United Nations Development Programme's Emergency Response Division was created to assist and coordinate immediate response to sudden crisis; to develop and implement capacity-building strategies to help countries anticipate and respond to man-made or natural crisis before they occur; and to initiate crisis and post-crisis development programmes of a curative nature in support of peace-building and recovery. The often difficult, dangerous and complex work of the Emergency Response Division is headed by Omar Bakhet, who is being interviewed in today's World Chronicle.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. Armed struggles have proliferated worldwide. Such conflicts are often set off by social disparities and economic depravation, along with underlying ethnic or religious divisions. The tragic results are loss of life, human suffering, institutional collapse and a plundering of the environment. Armed conflicts also divert precious financial resources and human energy from sustainable development, which further undermines peace and stability. How to deal with these complex emergencies?

Our guest today is Omar Bakhet, Director of the Emergency Response Division of UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme. UNDP has played a crucial role in emergency situations by helping to restore and sustain livelihoods and social infrastructure. Joining me to talk with Mr. Bakhet are Betsy Pisik of the *Washington Times* and Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand*.

Mr. Bakhet, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Mr. Bakhet, how fast can your Emergency Response Division react to crisis situations of the kind that we mentioned in the introduction?

BAKHET: Well, thank you very much first of all for this opportunity. I think UNDP, as the Agency responsible for coordination of the whole system, in particular through the Resident Coordination, who is at the same time the Humanitarian Coordinator, is in a position by establishing the Emergency Response Division to respond financially and manpower terms within few days anytime an emergency ensues in any part of the world. I think we should also keep in mind UNDP is not a relief agency and therefore does not respond by providing food and shelter and so on. This is the responsibility of other agencies. Our main focus is to make, first of all, the system function in a more coherent manner, in coordinated manner. Secondly, help the countries. If there is a situation where there is a government, help the government to be put into place to cover the situation. But most importantly is to bring in a coordination mechanism in place of ....

LITTLEJOHNS: So how do you actually perform these functions. I must say that Emergency Response Division can boost up the image of relief workers going in to help in situations of the kind we described. So what precisely do you do?

BAKHET: First of all, we support the Resident Coordinator who is the Humanitarian Coordinator by giving him the resources ...

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the UN Resident Coordinator ...

BAKHET: The person on the site, on the country.

LITTLEJOHNS: Supposing there isn't one?

BAKHET: We immediately make sure that there is somebody on board. This is one of the first things. Within a few days or within a few hours, we make sure that there is somebody who would coordinate the whole operation into place and has been given all the infrastructure needed to run his work. Secondly, also support by bringing in NGOs and -- in an emergency, you know, there are many players, and one of the key important thing that you have to do is there should be coordination in place immediately -- make sure that the relief agencies, the humanitarian agencies, NGOs, are in place, also timely. That there is a coordinated plan of action. That the roles and responsibilities are clearly defined between the different parties and that the response operations is taking place in a coordinated manner. This is very, very important and I think this is not something that one can quantify in terms of how much money one puts in but it is very, very critical for the success or failure of the operation.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much personal risk is involved by your people when they get into this kind of situation?

BAKHET: Well, I have been in Rwanda for two years, within two years, we have lost seventeen UN people -- seventeen UN staff international and ...

LITTLEJOHNS: All part of this Emergency Response?

BAKHET: Exactly. At the same time, the Resident Coordinator is the Designated Official or responsible for UN security and therefore you have to bring the communication equipments, the security staff in place, have the plans -- I think more important than anything, is to have very good plans in place -- and resource mobilization, help the

Agencies mobilize the resources needed, work together with the different agencies on on-site together with the donors, with the international NGOs, that the appropriate resources are put into place.

PISIK: You know, it sounds as though the primary role of UNDP -- it is as you say not a relief agency -- is to coordinate all the different hands that are trying to respond rapidly to something that either was not foreseen or is immediately life threatening. I'm wondering in all of the different elements that you talked about coordinating, you never mentioned the local government. How do you bring them in? How do you coordinate with the host country on this?

BAKHET: With my answer, I answered to one part of what UNDP responsibility is -- the coordination. I think the second important thing which we very often don't see on the media -- you know, it is always we see the hungry child, the dying people which is equally important -- but I think the other part which UNDP does, which is extremely important, is to bring in the governments and the institutions into being functional. By supporting, by giving the resources, by also bringing in manpower teams of experts in the different fields, helping restore the security, building in the police force, in cases like Rwanda, the justice sector. In the case of Rwanda, we went as far as even building prisons after the genocides. So the focus here is to enable the society and the country to cope with the situation. While the relief agencies do life saving measures, we put in the infrastructure into which this life saving measures is being put into place and it has also been thinking in terms of being sustainable and that is also in terms of finding solutions to the problem.

LESSING: But that leads me to think that in some cases, you almost have to start from scratch. I am not suggesting that the countries are not properly governed but in some cases they are not set up to deal with these emergencies particularly natural disasters, it seems to me. A conflict of war is one thing but enormous floods, to take one example, or the fires say in Southeast Asia. How do you help governments reform themselves so they can cope?

BAKHET: I think this is recognition to this defect that UNDP -- UNDP for many years used to say that it's a development agency, it's not involved with crisis. It is because

precisely of these two points you raised that UNDP has set up this Emergency Response Division. It is. If you look at the '80s, I remember I was in Somalia in the early '80s, we have had an operation with over 150 NGOs. There was not any sort of infrastructure in the country and within six months to one year, most of the agencies were scaling down or phasing out and we have infrastructure that has totally collapsed. No more hospitals, no more dispensaries or so. So what we try to do now, from the very beginning, be it in natural disasters, be it in man-made disasters, from the very beginning while NGOs and relief agencies are building, we build in the national capacity. From day one. Not waiting for a few months. Getting nationals to be trained. If they are not there like in the case of Congo, even to get nationals from outside the country. People from the country to come in with some degree of specialization, and so on, and create the infrastructure together with the Emergency Relief Operation, the Emergency Response Operation, create the national capability to be able and marry the two together so that it will be an ownership – a national ownership -- and goes over the long term. In natural disasters, I think, the situation is rather different. You have a massive one like the case of the floods today in China. We have a team at present in China. We have a team in Sudan and another team on its way to Bangladesh. You have the enormity of the problem. You require teams that the UN does not even have. So we have arrangements made -- standby arrangements with many nationals like the European Countries, the United States, you have National Disaster Management or Disaster Response teams -- who would go and help the country to cope with the problem at the very, very first phase. But the role of not only of UNDP, but the whole system through the Resident Coordinator who happened to be the Resident Representative of UNDP, is to make sure that we put into place the local, first at the local level, at the regional level, at the central command capacity. That is what we are doing today in China. There has been responses, but I think most of what we are doing in China is really to capacitate the Chinese themselves. Create the organizations to deal with the situation.

PISIK: I wonder if you can just pick a particularly interesting disaster and tell us a little bit about what you are doing to cope with it -- I mean the headlines right now.

There are disasters all over the world, particularly the natural disasters, are the most interesting. There are famine and floods, there's – all over the world – I mean, is there some particular example that you can use as an illustration?

BAKHET: Yes. I think there are disasters that has happened recently as a result of the El Niño, for instance, that is not very much known about. It is the failing of agricultural seasons in many, many countries. There is today starvation issues in many parts of Africa because the people had too much rain – they were not able to produce anything. So we are rehabilitating the agricultural sector. We are producing – we are using the World Food Programme to provide the short term. But what we are doing in Rwanda, for instance, we are rehabilitating marshlands to open new irrigation systems, small scale but big scale to produce strategically important food production – food stuffs so that the people can be fed. We are doing something similar in many of the Swahilian countries. This is as a result of the last – we draw a picture of Africa that is Africa always in drought. Now in many of the Central part of Africa, there had been too much rain for the last three years. So what we are doing with, again, bring in the other UN specialized agencies such as FAO, the World Agricultural Organization, the World Food Programme and we are not helping people in order not only to meet their immediate needs but we are working to develop a kind of agricultural programmes that will sustain the people through some critical agricultural projects such as irrigation schemes, rehabilitation of marshlands, and so on. Again, I will be focusing on El Niño which is a phenomena with effects that will be with us for some years to come. We are helping all the countries – Latin America, Peru, and others, to develop a national strategy, a national programme in those affected areas. To set up also coping mechanism because it seems like the phenomena will be recurring again while meeting the short term requirements.

LESSING: But coping mechanisms – everything that you have been saying – presupposes that there is a body of people, men and women in each country, who are close to being able to taking over. Now in a lot of countries, there is this term capacity building and capacity building relates to people. There are not enough trained well-educated people who can move in. There is not that body of people. Everybody is

wearing three or four hats. How do you help those countries which just don't have the numbers to deal with the problems?

BAKHET: I would say there are three main initiatives we take in this area. One is to bring national spark to help special programmes within UNDP to bring trained nationals who live abroad -- Europe, North America, Central -- we are speaking mainly developing countries. Second is through the international NGO and also some national NGOs or regional NGOs . There is a new phenomena emerging in Africa that we are using -- Regional African NGOs -- trained people from different African countries go and help in another country. The third is a UN system -- United Nations Volunteer Programme, UNV -- and this is a very, very effective and efficient system where we can get young, not necessarily all the time young, some of them with experience, some of them just freshly trained from universities and the like and training schools, who would be recruited by the UN and there, I think, we have developed an emergency mechanism that we can be able to put people within 72 hours or within one week and ten days and send them to these countries. They live with the communities for two years, and if there is a need, then could be extended. But our UNV goes for two years in countries and I think it is working quite well.

LESSING: Who are these people? And where do they come from?

BAKHET: They come from everywhere in the world -- from New York to Dhaka, from West Africa to any place. There are people who present their papers to the United Nations Volunteer Programme which is a department within UNDP situated in Germany. There are young and elderly people. There are people who are even retired who come and say they want to continue to do this work in all fields. The UNV programme has been used in all fields -- from the need for an emergency response operation, human rights monitors in Guatemala, in Rwanda, in Democratic Republic of Congo, to specialized people in the field of engineering, and in the field of water shed management, irrigation schemes and so on.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Omar Bakhet, Director of the Emergency Response Division of UNDP, the United Nations Development

Programme.

Mr. Bakhet, journalists, particularly television journalists, are drawn to disasters. We see images almost immediately of terrible things that happen in civil conflicts, natural disasters and so on. You have made something of a career out of disaster relief yourself, I believe. What drew you to an interest in this question?

BAKHET: Well, partly journalism. When looking at the media and looking at the disasters, one tend to feel that we have to play a role. We have to have to extend a hand and be relevant if we can. That's how I started and also partly my own background. I have been a refugee myself and I felt quite compelled to see some young people not to go through what I have gone through as a young person. These are the two factors that have I think motivated me in late '70s early '80s to focus on these areas. And I worked for eighteen years for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and I have been almost in every emergency. We will speak about journalism, if you don't mind, and the media. In every situation I have been, we always hope that if the television and the journalists will come back again after a few months we have been there. Their interest seem to be focused within the very, very initial period and rightly so, but there is much could be said about how – not only as, but I think we are only an extended hand – how the communities and societies themselves have dealt, have struggled in order to deal with the situation and that's a story to be told. Other areas that need to be also seen is the impact this have in receiving communities. We have countries, areas, one of some of the most poor regions of the world have received a million or two million people who share with them their scarce resources. Or the negative impact they leave in the countries from which they come. There's other areas in which we try to focus through the UNDP Development Programme. These are the untold stories of crisis that needs to be dealt with. Because I think crisis management is not only to deal with the crisis. It's to make sure that it would not happen again.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned having been in Rwanda. Of course the events in Rwanda produced situation where the UN's involvement was criticized by a number of governments and in the media. What was your experience in Rwanda? Do you think that

enough was done to cope with that situation?

BAKHET: Well, I think we are all familiar with the views that the government and the people of Rwanda has and in the region thinking that the UN has failed them. I think the International Community, all of us, we have failed Rwanda in 1994. The UN is nothing but the expression of the will of nations and it is the International Community that has failed and I think that the major lesson we have to draw is that things like this should not happen again. I think that's one of the most important lesson that we should draw from Rwanda. In terms of what the International Community through the UN or bilateral or through the NGOs have done, I think tremendous work has been done. I don't think we can heal the wounds of the Rwandese. This is something that they have to do themselves. But in terms of material assistance, in terms of putting the government into work together, in terms of trying to put the minimum infrastructure to ensure security as some sort of good governance, I think much has been done. Many lives have been saved and more needs to be done but it's the complexity of the problems there. We deal with the society that is plagued unfortunately with the culture of impunity and this can only be dealt with when the Rwandese come search among themselves and talk to each other and find a solution to their problem. There is much we can do, but we cannot do everything.

PISIK: You mentioned something before about how the journalist leave and lose interest and don't come back to see how things are shaping out. I wonder if the same is true of donor nations. We keep hearing about compassion fatigue, donor fatigue. Is there as much interest in maintaining assistance after, not so much long term, but certainly after the initial phase of a disaster once the waters have gone down or the fires are out, once waves of people have stopped migrating. Is there a way to maintain interest among the people that need to be ....

BAKHET: I think by and large, those who have the resources and the one the community has done quite a lot, a lot has been done. But there is a very interesting synergy between focus on situations and lack of an interest. If an issue like the one in the Congo today, instead of the Congo does not become in the forefront of the media what one calls loosely termed the CNN Syndrome, then you see the response also from the donor

communities does not become as could be if there had been a media focus on the situation. Secondly, the nature of conflicts themselves, I think during the Cold War era we deal with other factors involved in the manner of how we responded to those situations despite the high moral grounds, there was also the political imperatives which to some extent when it comes to Africa, some developing world, that political imperative is not there. And therefore you will see the motivation is in the short lived or short term emergency relief that the donors partly there is a focus, partly there is a pressure by the public and civil societies and partly there is also the general compassion to do to help those who are in need but this does not sustain itself over the long term and that's why we find ourselves in a very much difficult situations today in Africa to raise enough resources to do beyond the emergency.

LESSING: Do people look – I'm thinking of journalists I suppose but I really mean maybe more than just journalist – the people want to look a little more at those young people who have been in conflict and who are now trying to pick up a life again, I think of the child soldiers. How does your area help them? Or do you help them?

BAKHET: Definitely. While I was in Rwanda one of our main focus was two areas. Among the many other issues is the child soldier and children who have been detained for being suspected of committing genocide. Children at the age of eight, or seven. Children who has been detained with their mothers for instance have been committed. These have been areas of a lot of work. But I think to answer your question – there's much being done by UNICEF and other systems on many, many countries. But there is, I do believe that there is, we live at the time when there is a crisis of vision on how we deal with these problems. The donor fatigue comes partly because for the last 30-40 years we have been dealing with the same problems without really finding a lasting solution or a mechanism for them not to happen again. There is a – we live at a time where we need a renewed vision, a renewed commitment – there is I think in the world enough resources to solve almost every problem that exists but the distribution of these resources and the focus of these resources is not up to the mark.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much competition, so to speak, is there among the

people who are involved – the organizations – that are involved in the work that you do? Do you experience sort of turf wars where people feel that somebody is doing something that they should be doing and vice-versa?

BAKHET: To be frank and honest, yes, I would not say that's the human nature but sometimes we are driven by scarce resources. Every person wanted – institutions need to produce themselves and rightly so, but I think competition could be a healthy competition if we make sure that we avoid duplication of activities. And rather than me to get resources then I do your work, it is better for me and you to divide the resource and each one will be a source of excellence in the areas of our expertise and this is precisely the function of the Resident Coordinator. And the new Secretary-General and his UN Reform one of the focus being known to the different executive committees that we have here set up to make sure that the focus of UN interventions in these countries is well coordinated through the mechanism set up of the Resident Coordinator not only in terms of making sure that there is so-called coordination meetings but first of all, defining and identifying needs -- what needs to be met – looking at who best serve each sector of that and then distribution of functions and roles between the different agencies. I think this is a very welcoming -- I have benefitted from this in Rwanda, I must say, and there is a new spirit in the end. But I think we are trying very hard to make competition a healthy one.

PISIK: One of the things I wonder is – if you have been engaged in some of these situations as you say for 30 and 40 years, how do you know when to stop? At any point has the Organization ever said, we can't fix this, we should save our resources and do something more efficient, more useful with them? I see by your own statistics, 40 percent of development assistance goes to emergency relief. Is that an efficient way to spend it or is there a certain triage going on?

BAKHET: First of all, there are all sorts of success stories. Namibia is a success story. Mozambique is a success story. The Horn of Africa three years ago or four years ago is a great success story. Cambodia was a success story. But I think the reason why there has been a shift of much resources in the last few years from the development from the long term to short term, because the number of emergencies immediately after the

Cold War Era with the Gulf Crisis, in one year we had four or five major emergencies which we never had before. We were at one moment looking at how often emergencies happen and we find very, very interesting when we analyze -- we find very, very interesting sequence of time. It is every four or five years there has been one emergency during the Cold War Era. As if it is being planned. But in 1991, '92, '93 you have the Gulf, you have Bosnia, you have the Cambodia solution to the Cambodia problem, you had Mozambique, all these in the span of only eighteen months together at the same time. So it has depleted the resources that normally would have gone to the long term. But what is important, I think is, we should not just focus on the short term. Solutions are not by emergency relief, it's not life saving measures are the only solutions as much as they are important, I think we should invest on those sectors that would help us to find other long term and lasting solutions. And that's what we are trying to do by setting up this new Division.

LESSING: Could you cope without your partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations?

BAKHET: You see, we call ourselves like the family and each member of that family is equally important. I think the people, the victims themselves are the most important elements. Without them and without their awareness, the NGOs both national and international NGOs which we call the civil society, the governments no matter on whatever situation from the extreme cases like Somalia where you don't have a central government, Afghanistan, or so some sort of local authorities be it traditional or formal are extremely important. And the donor community and the representatives of the donors, I think there has been also in the last few years very encouraging development in the donor community that they have more of staff presence in the field, they are more concerned and they are seeing themselves also more as partners.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Bakhet, we have only a few seconds left. Every time there is an emergency situation that you guys want to get involved in, do you immediately issue an appeal for more funds or do you have a fund that you can draw on?

BAKHET: We do have for instance, in UNDP, we are allocating now five

percent of the core funds of UNDP to crisis countries and this is a very, very new ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Five percent?

BAKHET: Five percent of the total UNDP core resources. Other agencies they have some resources put aside for contingencies. What we do in every situation is we use these resources to respond immediately. An appeal needs to be prepared. It need also based on needs assessment on sight. It requires sometimes a few weeks before we issue an appeal.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Bakhet, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Omar Bakhet, Director of the Emergency Response Division of UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme. He was interviewed by Betsy Pisik of the *Washington Times* and Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**